The Missing Practice: Why Buddhist Communities Built on Compassion Fail to Care
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Until a few years ago, I was a committed Zen student in the Soto Zen lineage; while I have infused this paper with references to Zen language and form, it is, at its heart, simply Buddhist. I explore how the Buddhist ideal of compassion can fail to foster *caring* communities and propose a remedy. My intention is that the essence and ideas presented here resonate regardless of the readers' identities and religious lineage.

The Dokusan Room

I was immersed in practice at a reputable monastery when I witnessed sexual harassment, reported it, was assaulted in retaliation, and was then served a misogynistic consequence. The Abbot, who also held the position of *Roshi*[1], was the spiritual teacher to both the perpetrator and me; and the Roshi, as Abbot, decided that my practice at the monastery, along with the male perpetrator's, would be controlled by the monastery in order to keep us separate.

Weeks into living under this constraint, I entered the *dokusan*[2] room for face-to-face teaching and expressed my mounting distress: "I am really struggling. As Abbot, you are making decisions that are harmful to me, you are limiting my ability to practice here because of a male student's aggression. And then I come into this room with you as Roshi, and I'm supposed to be seeking spiritual guidance. This is awful. Confusing, impossible..."

In the flickering candlelight of the pre-dawn meeting, his face remained blank and his eyes unwavering. "I am one person," he replied.

His words reverberated in the silence, and an energy swelled in me. I guffawed: "I'm a 55-year-old woman; you think I don't know you are *one person*?" In my chest, as in every interaction before and after, I felt more than heard my heart's longing paired with despair: *Where are you? Come down!*

Compassion as Ideology

Compassion is understood as the foundation of Buddhist practice, and it is often described as one wing of a two-winged bird, with the other wing being Wisdom. Buddhist practice is considered a training in compassion and wisdom, and to make a commitment as a student, one practices – or "trains" as it's called in Zen – principally as *seeker*. The relationship with a teacher is formed by the student's *seeker* role: the teacher embodies that which we seek, and they are, compassionately and wisely, guiding us toward our own understanding and expression of compassion and wisdom.

Let's take a moment to consider the Buddhist definition of "compassion" found in the prominent U.S.-based journal, *Lion's Roar*:

"Compassion goes beyond sympathy or empathy. Practicing compassion allows us to recognize the suffering and difficulties experienced by all living beings, and to respond with a genuine desire to alleviate that suffering. It is a deep and active form of empathy that motivates compassionate action."[3]

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[1] "Roshi" is the honorific term used for the top--most tier of Zen teachers.
[2] "dokusan" is the formal, one--on--one, confidential meeting between a Zen student and the Roshi.
[3] *Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time,* "Buddhism A – Z".
https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhism/compassion--karuna/

Having spent years in training, this definition is as familiar and natural to me as the arrangement of *zafus*[4] in the *zendo*[5]. Today, however, I approach this definition with greater acuity, and I view it as possessing problematic shortfalls stemming from its entrenchment in ideology. I invite you to consider:

- The theme of transcendence. "Compassion goes *beyond"*: it transcends the material world and human experience of sympathy and empathy.
- Ambiguity. "*Practicing* compassion...": what *is* "the practice" of compassion?
- Emphasis on insight. "*Recognizing* the suffering...": insight is the emphasized outcome (*though a student's attainment of insight is assessed by the teacher).
- Depersonalization of suffering. "...experienced *by all living beings"*: it is about suffering writ large, global suffering which transcends an individual experience (it transcends even the human experience).
- Intention (absent impact). "...to respond with a *genuine desire*": response is about intention, and the intention behind an action is what's of importance, not the outcome.
- Dissonance. "It is a *deep and active form of empathy*": Is compassion *"beyond"* empathy or is it a *"deep form"* of it?
- Cyclical (+ ambiguous) "...that motivates *compassionate action."*: we are cycled back to where we started. What *is* compassionate action? It is action that transcendently addresses depersonalized suffering, involves insight & intention (etc). The label "thought-terminating cliché" has been applied to similar dynamics.

Ideology, and the way it exists in the framing of "compassion," keeps the concept suspended in the realm of a *belief*. However, as cult expert Dr. Cathleen Mann[6] detailed in her work, beliefs are not the point: the point is how people *use* beliefs *to treat each other*.

Entering dokusan that morning, I remained committed to the training and its ideological beliefs, even as harm unfolded in real time, within and because of my continuing practice. I chose to engage my student-teacher relationship fully and vulnerably, trusting that he, as teacher, would receive me – *treat* me – grounded in his spiritual commitment and advanced practice of compassion and wisdom.

What Was Missing

Yet, when the Roshi rang his bell ending our dokusan, and while I performed the choreographed forms of respect – prostrations, bows in *gassho*[7] – I knew my trust, which is to say my belief in the practice, had been betrayed. My embodied response to the pithy, "Zen-master"-esque reply turned me definitively back to my own wisdom. Not only had the Roshi not met me where I was – vulnerable – he had bypassed my very real, and irrefutably appropriate naming of the commonly understood issues which can arise with dual roles. Most relevantly in that moment, he chose to remain aloof and immune to the impact which our dual relationship – created by his dual roles – was having on me.

Was the Roshi meeting me with compassion?

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[4] "zafu": the name used in Zen for the meditation cushions used for meditation practice while seated on the floor.

[5] "zendo": the name of any formal Zen meditation hall.

[6] Cathleen Mann, PhD. https://psyris.com/cultspecialist

[7] "gassho": the traditional hand gesture within Buddhist traditions, two palms placed together.

By the Buddhist definition, it's certainly possible. I continue to hold the view that the Roshi has achieved significant "recognition" or insight and has developed over the decades of his monastic life, a "genuine desire" or intention to alleviate suffering (writ large).

But whether or not "compassion" was present, I can say with certainty that *caring* was not. (*Where are you? Come down!)* The Roshi is a human, and he missed an important opportunity to center my well-being, to offer care. More consequential for me, though, was that he used his role as the possessor of wisdom to weaponize it. Rather than guide me toward my own wisdom, he made explicitly clear that there was no room in his room for the wisdom I brought to him. It woke me up. To *offer care* required that we meet, face-to-face, in shared vulnerability, *and* in shared wisdom. In my role as student, I bore the brunt of his failure; and his failure was the absence of empathy.

Brené Brown, PhD, MSW, became renowned as a shame and vulnerability researcher, and her findings in the field have fueled her Executive Leadership training worldwide. Her work has led to the conclusion that only when one is willing and able to be present with another person's pain can one respond empathically. Her work goes on to state that empathy "is a tool of compassion... It is connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience,"[8] and it consists of five core skills. In contrast to Buddhist "compassion," which arises organically from the practice (of itself), empathy is a teachable skill set, which can be practiced in relationship, assessed for progress, and tangibly measured for purposes of accountability. Brown makes clear that empathy is a foundational tool for developing compassion, making it a "practice" in the truest sense of the word.

The Five Empathy Skills[9] of Compassion are:

1. *Perspective-taking.* Let go of role. The Venerable must be vulnerable; the student claims their own wisdom. (Empathic response by Roshi: "Can you tell me more about your experience?")
2. *Staying out of judgment.* Do not negate another's experience, nor privilege your own (i.e. Roshi and other leaders' continual refrain: "we are caring for you" and "this is in our care"). (Empathic response: "I've never thought of how this might be for you.")
3. *Recognizing emotion as valuable*. Relinquish your own narrative and cultivate emotional literacy. (Empathic response: 'engaging' through mirroring/facial expression.)
4. *Communicating your understanding of the emotion*. (Empathic response: "I can see you are struggling; it sounds like you are frustrated, maybe overwhelmed.")
5. *Mindfulness.* This is the mindfulness of knowing you know nothing about another person. (Empathic response: "I have no idea what your experience, as a 55-year-old woman, is like. What do you need, what would be helpful?")

Engaging the 5 skills of empathy, one relationally attends to the suffering of a specific person by connecting to the emotions being expressed; all in the present moment, rooted by place and time.

Of quick note: several of these skills are labeled similarly to concepts found in Buddhist teachings. Because of this, I believe it's essential to emphasize for the Buddhist reader that, when it comes to "mindfulness" and "non-judgment," empathic mindfulness *is the moment-to-moment*

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[8] Brown, Brené. Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience. Random House, 2021.

[9] Brown, Brené. Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead. Penguin, 2012.

knowing you know nothing about another person or their experience, and empathic non-judgment is *to not negate another's experience, nor privilege your own*.

The Obstacle and the Cure

Brown has a term for the emotional armor which institutional leaders use to keep away experiences of vulnerability, and it is "vulnerability shields."[10] Applied to Buddhist spaces, I call the armor "*venerability* shields" (Buddhist leaders holding venerability *in)*. Either way, the dynamic is the same, and the obstacle to vulnerability can be understood to be *venerability*. The only path out of emotional armoring, and into empathic caring, is through vulnerability.

I want to be clear that the issue with *venerability* is not about individual "bad apples", nor complicit communities. Venerability is a systemic issue. It is the way Buddhist beliefs are being used to inform and justify uncaring treatment of students, by teachers, in community, reinforced by ambiguous ideological language disguised as "values" and "practices."

The cure for *systemic venerability* is to explicitly define "caring,*"* and explicitly articulate the practices which constitute "Caring Practice." This can and should be done as profusely, and in as equally descriptive detail, as that dedicated to the how-to of "sitting practice."[11] In this way, to Zen's simplified directive to "just sit", we might add: "just care".

While the task of defining and detailing the needed practice of caring in its entirety is beyond the scope of this paper, my argument can be summarized as follows:

- That, in order to prevent and mitigate the harm that is occurring when compassion fails to care in Buddhist community, the traditional Buddhist training methods must be updated according to contemporary needs and supporting research.
- This update should include a second practice, a relational and interactive one, which balances 'recognition' and 'insight' with tangible relational skills that can be trained, practiced, assessed and, ultimately, be used to hold everyone – everyone – accountable. Skillsets would include empathy and emotional literacy.

A Call to Action (not Intention)

To this day, I live with a single and significant paradox from my own life of practice. Through my "training" with harm at the monastery, I experienced detrimental consequences at all layers of my well-being, and I also *woke up.* "Practicing" the harm woke me up to it and the awakening ultimately required that I "leave the raft [of traditional Buddhist practice] on the riverbank," as per the traditional Raft parable.[12]

"Compassion", as the cultivator of intention, is a good start. "Care," though, is a call to action.

As such, I want to close with an invitation to you: where in your life, which relationships, might need your practice of empathy? What spaces and places are you in where compassion may exist, but *care* is what's needed? Then do it, bring it. Care.

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[10] Brown, Brené. Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead. Penguin, 2012.

[11] Google: "It is impossible to provide an exact, definitive number of books and articles devoted to the instruction of Buddhist sitting meditation (*zazen*, *vipassana*, or *samatha*), as thousands of new pieces of literature are published annually across the globe in multiple languages...a search for 'Buddhist meditation guide' or 'how to meditate Buddhism' on Amazon/Google Books yields over **10,000 to 20,000 results** spanning contemporary guides, translations of historical manuals, and commentary.

[12] The Parable of the Raft: is a famous teaching from the Alagaddūpama Sutta (Discourse on the Simile of the Water Snake) in the Majjhima Nikāya of the Pāli Canon.